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ABSTRACT

This summary report presents an integration of findings on teachers' perceptions of their working conditions, based on survey and interview data from special educators in six large urban school districts. Emphasis is on perceptions of problems related to job design, the highly interrelated set of structures, systems, and processes intended to support major work objectives. Major findings include: (1) perceived role conflicts and difficulties prioritizing their many diverse responsibilities; (2) a sense of role overload and increasing work challenges further intensified by shortages of resources; (3) a sense of weakened autonomy regarding their professional judgment; and (4) difficulties relating to the larger school culture and collaboration with general educators. This combination of factors is seen to lead to high levels of stress, worsening feelings about the ability to teach effectively, and, in some cases, lower commitment to the field. Recommendations resulting from the study include: increase the information flow from central offices to special education teachers at school sites; provide more relevant professional development opportunities; and provide more opportunities for meaningful shared decision-making. The body of the report addresses each of the four identified areas of difficulty and includes quotations from teachers interviewed. (DB)

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WORKING PAPER # 4

Working Conditions: Job Design

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Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions

Section 1: Impact of Job Design on Stress, Commitment, and Intent to Leave

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Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions
Section 1: Impact of Job Design on Stress, Commitment and Intent to Leave

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary report presents an integration of major findings on teachers' perceptions of their working conditions based on survey and interview data from special educators in six large urban districts located throughout the country. In this section we focus on special educators' perceptions of problems related to *job design* — the *highly interrelated* set of structures, systems, and processes which support, or fail to support, accomplishment of major work objectives.

Job design essentially asks: Does the job, with all that it entails, make sense? Is it feasible? Is it one that a well-trained, interested, special education professional can manage and at the same time accomplish their major objective — enhancing students' academic, social and/or vocational competence? The unfortunate answer to these questions for a striking number of teachers is *no* — particularly those working in large urban school districts.

The following are major findings relating to job design and its effects on special education teachers:

- **Role conflict.** Changes in teachers work roles and responsibilities, due to increased emphasis on inclusion, have led a sizable of proportion of special educators to experience difficulties with **prioritization** of the many diverse responsibilities they are asked to perform. There was no sense that districts provide teachers with sensible criteria for prioritization of effort or relevant models to follow.

- **Role overload.** In all districts, many teachers feel overwhelmed and unable to manage the changes taking place in their work. Aspects of work which appeared particularly difficult across all studies for teachers to manage included the increasing size and complexity of their student caseloads (which some now consider unmanageable), growing expectations for collaboration with classroom teachers, and mounting paperwork responsibilities. These work challenges were further intensified by severe shortages of resources. Few teachers saw any relationship between paperwork and effective instruction.

- **Weakened Autonomy.** In many instances, teachers feel they can not use curricula they think — or research suggests — are best for their students, and/or instructional groupings that make sense for them. Beyond its day-to-day impact on their classroom, such lack of involvement represented for some teachers an implied lack of confidence in, and devaluing of, their professional opinions.

- **Issues Relating to School Culture and Collaboration with General Educators.** A number of special education teachers in the district experienced considerable difficulty in successfully implementing meaningful inclusion of their students, due partially to the attitudes and apparent lack of openness of some of the classroom

teachers in their schools. Further, teachers feel that sufficient professional development and planning time with classroom teachers is not available, *primarily because existing work demands had not been modified or redistributed in any way.*

This combination of factors leads to high levels of stress, worsening feelings about the ability to teach effectively or assist students and, in some cases, lower commitment to the field. For example, in one of the districts, about half of the special education workforce experienced either daily or weekly stress stemming from job design issues such as caseload diversity (58%), challenging student behaviors (61%), and limited resources (41%). Chronic feelings of confusion, dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness often led teachers to thoughts about leaving and ultimately, attrition.

No easy solutions to these problems have emerged. Yet, we feel that there are at least three crucial means for improving working conditions related to job design:

1. Increase information flow from central offices to special education teachers at school sites, particularly as it relates to central office policies and rationale.

2. Provide more relevant professional development opportunities, especially those that promote substantive and ongoing collegial interaction between special educators. Many teachers hunger for more contact with colleagues, to share ideas and strategies, to observe successful models of inclusion or collaboration. For many, attending staff development sessions with general educators, while occasionally useful, is insufficient.

3. Provide more opportunities for meaningful shared decision-making particularly on issues that directly affect teachers' work.

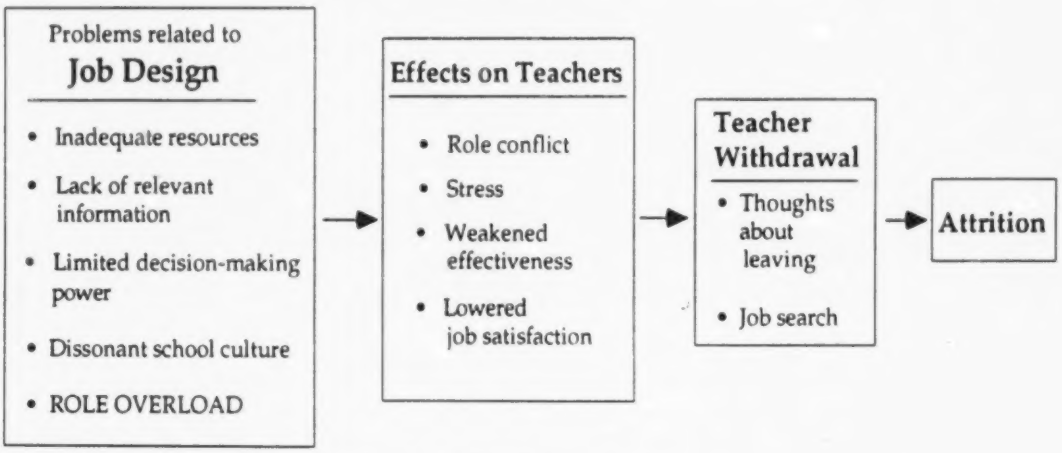
Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions
Section 1: Impact of Job Design on Stress, Commitment and Intent to Leave

Shifts in the delivery of special education services, especially the current movement to include all special education students in neighborhood schools regardless of disability, have produced marked changes in the roles and responsibilities of many special education teachers. These changes are accompanied by increased interest in better understanding factors affecting the working conditions and retention of special education teachers.

This summary report presents an integration of major findings on teachers' perceptions of their working conditions based on survey and interview data from special educators in six large urban districts located throughout the country. Data was collected from individuals who had left the field of special education, those intending to leave in the near future, and those who planned to continue in the field.

In this section we focus on special educators' perceptions of problems with working conditions related to Job Design (An accompanying report includes information on issues related to Support from the Central Office and Building Principal.) Job design can be viewed as the *highly interrelated* set of structures, systems, and processes which support, or fail to support, accomplishment of major work objectives. Figure 1 illustrates some aspects of job design and its effects on teachers.

Figure 1. Problems in Job Design Leading to Special Educators' Dissatisfaction and Attrition



[Note: Composite model based on ERI and RTI conceptual frameworks]

Job design essentially asks: Does the job, with all that it entails, make sense? Is it feasible? Is it one that a well-trained, interested, special education professional can manage and at the same time accomplish their major objective — enhancing students' academic, social and/or vocational competence? The unfortunate answer to these questions for a striking number of teachers is *no* — particularly those working in large urban school districts.

Figure 2 illustrates some of the specific areas of dissatisfaction that stem from problems with job design.

Figure 2. Satisfaction Stemming From Job Design

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your job?

	satisfied	neutral	dissatisfied
• instructional materials and supplies provided	21%	41%	38%
• school staff's attitude toward special education	43	20	37
• the quality of the support and encouragement you receive	51	17	32

Problems Related to Job Design Identified by Special Education Teachers

The following are major findings relating to these interrelated aspects of *job design* from analysis of data from the three research projects conducted by San Diego State University in conjunction with American Institute for Research, Research Triangle Institute, and Eugene Research Institute.

Role Overload

Many teachers expressed problems with role overload by indicating that they don't have enough time to do their work, that they need additional planning time or aides and clerical assistants to help them with their responsibilities. Over two thirds in one study also indicated that having "too much to do and to little time to do it" was causing frequent stress. In all districts, many teachers felt overwhelmed and unable to manage the changes taking place in their work.

Aspects of work which appeared particularly difficult across all studies for teachers to manage included the increasing complexity of their student caseloads, growing expectations for collaboration with classroom teachers, and mounting paperwork responsibilities. In some districts, a higher number of second language learners and/or students with severe emotional or behavioral disabilities further exacerbates tensions.

Caseload problems related to more than just numbers of students. The movement to non-categorical services, coupled with the gradual elimination of self-contained programs, resulted in a significant increase in the *diversity* of teachers' caseloads — age and grade ranges, number and specific exceptionality areas, ability levels, and the complexity and intensity of students' problems, all influence manageability. One resource teacher who was faced with an increasingly wide range of student needs in her class, reasonably raised the concern that she was not able to meet all of their needs:

> After we changed to cross-categorical, however, we [resource teachers] had students with severe disabilities with us half a day. And so I became more like a self-contained teacher. I had students with very severe disabilities half a day . . .-- students who required a tremendous amount of my time and attention.
>
> I was not able to help those students with mild disabilities who could have been brought up to grade level . . . I wasn't able to do that, because my energies were going to working with these very severe students.
>
> I couldn't do any grouping whatsoever. There were . . .seven different grade levels, and two different languages. The way they are staffing the new model is doing a definite disservice to the students. The ratio . . . needs to be lower.

One teacher pinpointed the consequent drop in efficacy: "You start apologizing for what you knew you could do. You can't see any progress. And that's what you're there for."

Another teacher bluntly documented how poor job design leads to chronic stress and the decision to leave:

> I wasn't able to make adequate gains with students, and that was what made me really feel bad. I mean, I didn't feel like I was meeting the needs of the students the way I had been. I wasn't really [making the kind of progress with them] that I knew could be done.

Special education teachers' jobs have grown, over time, to involve much more than providing instruction to students. As expected, we found that the non-instructional parts of the job were definitely a source of stress for many of these teachers — with particular emphasis on growing paperwork demands.

Special educators cited paperwork as an issue more often than general educators. In one study, almost 25% of the special educators gave paperwork as a major reason for desiring to leave. In interviews, teachers cited the many different problematic aspects of paperwork, including having too much of it, too little time to complete it, and

unnecessary (unimportant), redundant, and inconsistent requirements. They indicated that excessive paperwork interferes with teaching, their most important responsibility.

In another district, a full seventy percent of the teachers surveyed cited "bureaucratic requirements - rules, regulations, and paperwork", as a frequent source of stress in their work, and nearly all of those who actually left teaching raised concerns with escalating paperwork requirements.

These work challenges were further intensified by severe shortages of resources. In one district, staffing patterns and resources levels were perceived as inadequate for meeting the challenges presented by the district's efforts towards inclusion and contributing strongly to role overload. In another district, forty-one percent of teachers reported that "inadequate resources to do a good job" was a frequent source of stress.

Special educators indicated that the lack of instructional resources was one of their most pressing problems, and included inadequate materials, supplies, equipment, computers, and aides. Many indicated that they either had to provide the teaching materials themselves or to do without. In some districts, a lack of bilingual aides was cited as a serious resource deficit.

Lack of Autonomy

In some instances, teachers felt they could not use curricula that they think (or research suggests) are best for their students, and/or instructional groupings that make sense for them.

Interviews with teachers who left indicated that their perceived lack of involvement in key decisions that directly affected their work was a critical factor in their decisions to leave. One teacher spoke about her request for materials and equipment to support her instructional program. The first response from the central office was "no" due to lack of funds. Eventually they ordered some other curricula for her, but she felt what ultimately arrived addressed neither her original request nor her students' needs. It can not be overemphasized how impotent teachers feel when given little control over critical tools of their craft.

Teachers described their frustration at being separated from important decisions around curriculum selection and instructional philosophy in the district. For example, some teachers expressed favor for including some systematic instruction to build phonemic awareness, and had reservations about the whole-language method for teaching reading to students with disabilities — a method strongly endorsed by the district, with no empirical support. They were frustrated that the central office dictated a method of instruction, and particularly that they dictated it as a single approach for all students.

One teacher recalled her experience:

> [The district is] saying, "This is THE way you must teach now." I feel you have to know what's been used, what's available. And then, you have to draw the best from each of these programs and

put them together to fit the child. Some children need phonics. Some children don't. I don't say you have to stand up there and teach everybody phonics. But some children need it. They should have the opportunity to learn those skills then.

A lack of involvement in decision making around student placements was another significant theme for a number of teachers. Teachers with longer tenure in the field remembered a time when they had been active members of the placement team and integrally involved in student placement decisions. In contrast, they reported that these decisions were now made at the district level by administrators and supervisors, and they often only learned about a new placement when the student arrived at the classroom door.

It just seems like that special ed teachers have to follow rules that are dictated by . . . the administrators who are in a service center apart from the school. Maybe they are following a higher demand that's coming from somewhere, I don't know that.

But I know that my word has no clout whatsoever. That I can be easily overridden by people in administrative positions, people who have *never* met the child.

Issues Relating to School Culture and Collaboration with General Educators

"Commitment to the new way of working together
has . . . to be tested under fire." (Hanna, 1988, p. 158)

A number of special education teachers in the district experienced considerable difficulty in successfully implementing meaningful inclusion of their students, due partially to the attitudes and apparent lack of openness of some of the classroom teachers in their schools. Many special educators question whether classroom teachers have the knowledge to work effectively with students with disabilities. In one study, only 2.9% agreed that classroom teachers had such capabilities. Further, half of the teachers disagreed with the statement that "the staff at this school have positive attitudes toward special education staff and students." Special educators were also less likely than general educators to indicate that they "felt included in what goes on in their schools," that they are "treated with respect" by their colleagues or that they "exchanged professional ideas with their colleagues."

Several of the teachers interviewed expressed concerns about the receptivity of classroom teachers' to special educators working in the classroom. One teacher described her experience as "walking on eggshells."

Three fourths of the teachers don't want you in their room. Whether it's insecurity, whether it's the fact that they are the teacher, possessiveness, this is their room, whatever the reason. Three fourths of them do not want another person coming in to their room. They're very explicit about it.

Other times, teachers raised concerns about the possibility of inclusion, because of some classroom teachers' assumptions about students with special needs.

There are some classroom teachers who are not able to change their expectations for different children. They're inflexible. For example, say I have a student who's in 6th grade, reading at the 3rd grade level . . . But then they go back to their classroom for

> social studies, and they're told to read chapter so-and-so and answer the questions . . . they get a failing grade in social studies because they can't do that. It's not fair.

She reasonably concluded:

> You could work with some of the teachers but not all of the teachers. Not all teachers are able to understand the person who cannot do everything the way they think they should. They have no patience or tolerance for that child. And that's your special education child.

Many teachers also feel that sufficient planning time is not available, *primarily because existing work demands had not been modified or redistributed in any way.* As one teacher put it: "To collaborate with the teacher -- to get carryover -- you need time with the teacher. And there isn't that time. It's not built in. *Your caseload hasn't gone down; you still have to service the same number of kids.*" The result was that teachers had to try to squeeze the time for this central activity into an already packed day:

> Virtually the only time I could meet with teachers was lunch. I don't know if you know what teachers are like at lunch? There's barely time to go to the bathroom and eat your lunch and get your wits together and make essential phone calls. There's no way you can really effectively interface with teachers at lunch. So, it was almost impossible for me to find enough time to spend with one teacher, let alone all of them.

These special educators' comments point to the importance of laying the groundwork necessary to ensure innovations can have a chance to succeed. Clearly, professional development plays an important role. Attention must also be given to basic logistics surrounding increased instructional interdependence between special and general educators.

Role Conflict

Role conflict is quite high for many teachers. Survey findings suggest that recent changes in teachers work roles and responsibilities, due to increased parent advocacy and increased emphasis on inclusion, have left many teachers feeling confused about what is expected of them in their jobs — confusion due largely to perceived limited information flow. Almost one third reported that conflicting expectations, goals, and directives were a frequent source of stress. One in four felt that their specific responsibility for integrating students had also not been clearly spelled out.

These changes in teachers' work roles and responsibilities, due to increased emphasis on inclusion, have led a sizable of proportion of special educators to experience difficulties with **prioritization** of the many diverse responsibilities they are asked to perform. There was no sense that districts provide teachers with sensible criteria for prioritization of effort or relevant models to follow.

Teachers often felt the way the work was organized actually set up competing priorities. For example, many teachers felt that attention to paperwork could only be given at the expense of instructional time. One teacher asked rhetorically: "Do you

want me to [teach], or do you want me just to spend all my time writing about it?" Two others echoed her concern:

> You spend one day a week as an elementary special ed teacher handling paper. You don't teach. You handle paperwork and you test; you write IEPs; you have meetings. I think they could probably train educational assistants to do a lot of it.

> I work with children. And I said, heck with the paperwork. I'd rather do activities in the classroom, or work with small groups, or even work with discipline problems or whatever. But I didn't like filling out all the umpteen [forms]. I wanted to spend my time with the children, with students—versus doing paperwork.

Some teachers felt that many of these non-instructional tasks were irrelevant to their instructional work, neither serving their original purpose nor used by their intended audiences. In fact, one former special education teacher noted that, while paperwork was somewhat more extensive in her new position as Title I specialist, she did not resent it as much because it was more directly tied to her daily lessons with students.

Others described feeling frustrated or even insulted that their education and training were being squandered on tasks so clerical in nature. These teachers felt the clerical elements should be delegated to clerical support staff, or the entire task should be streamlined or computerized:

> I was working 60 hours a week and at least probably 45 hours of that was just blasted paperwork and assessment in class of the kids and all the stuff that went with that. And it just got to be too much. I mean, I was trained to teach — not to be a secretary. And so, that's why I got out of it. Pure and simple

In both the survey and interview studies, teachers consistently reported feeling that they were not able to conduct their work in ways that were consistent with their professional beliefs and goals. In most cases, the issues for these teachers did not reflect ideology or preparation. In fact, up to 90% of the teachers surveyed felt prepared to deal with many critical aspects of their work, including managing student behavior and responding to the diversity and severity of their students needs. The difficulties these teachers were experiencing related more accurately to a perception that their jobs had not been sufficiently redesigned to render changes in job responsibilities feasible. As one teacher put it:

> "The idea [behind inclusion] . . . is good. But when you begin to work it out, there are . . . many complications. In order for it to *work*, there has to be more time or more teachers."

Directions for Addressing Chronic Problems in Job Design

This combination of factors leads to high levels of stress, worsening feelings about the ability to effectively teach or assist their students and, in some cases, lower commitment to the field. Chronic feelings of confusion, dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness often led teachers to thoughts about leaving and ultimately, attrition.

No easy solutions to these problems have emerged. Clearly, it is not enough to simply speed up old processes when work requirements change. Often what is needed is a re-evaluation of the assumptions and rules that underlie operations and a re-engineering of work processes to accommodate shifting work demands.

We feel that there are at least three crucial means for improving working conditions related to job design.

1. Increasing Information Flow. Flow of relevant information from central offices to special education teachers at school sites is minimal, except on issues related to paperwork. Teachers virtually never feel that the district provides rationales for policies and decisions.

According to Hanna (1988), in productive organizations, information systems are designed "to provide information to *the point of action and problem solving.*" Many teachers reported concerns that information was not being shared or funneled down to their level and, as a result, felt deep confusion about what was expected of them.

Several veteran teachers described how information sharing deteriorated as the district grew larger and more bureaucratic. Their testimonies are consistent with research on the evolution of organizations, which posits that as organizations grow and mature, knowledge and information tend to become more centralized. One teacher echoed the voice of several in her discussion of this shift.

> One of the problems is that none of us really know what the guidelines are any more. I don't know what qualifies anybody any more.
>
> I got to the point where I didn't even know what they were working with to make their decisions. I mean, I used to --and now I don't know what the district's guidelines are for placement, what they are for category, what the different programs mean.
>
> In the past, the teachers always had hands-on, and we were highly knowledgeable --in fact, we'd have in-services, they'd want the teachers to stay current and knowledgeable. But in recent years it got to the point where I couldn't even keep track of who qualified for what.

2. Providing more relevant professional development opportunities for special educators and classroom teachers to interact in substantive ways. Many hunger for more contact with colleagues, to share ideas and strategies, to observe successful models of inclusion or collaboration. The districts fail to facilitate such interactions. Some of the veterans report that these opportunities did exist in years past. Few blame individual administrators, they realize they are reacting to a range of outside forces and budget cuts, but still they need information.

These findings indicate that an appreciable proportion of special education teachers feel isolated and attempts to collaborate with other teachers at schools are likely to be extremely difficult. They also point to the fact that school buildings vary greatly in the extent to which they support special education.

Over half of the teachers surveyed reported experiencing only minimal conflict when it came to spending time working directly with students versus with their classroom teachers — an indication that many teachers are managing to adapt to their new work roles with little turmoil. Still, a core group, 25%, indicated that working with classroom teachers was a frequent source of conflict in their work as it infringed on their time with students. Structures that support substantive collegial networks are a crucial need identified by teachers. And of course, models of how to prioritize and how to find the time to create relationships with general educators is crucial. This includes district guidelines helping to address which activities are low priority.

One teacher's comments tied the idea of successful collaboration and productive teacher relations back into job design. She stated that:

> The special education teacher that goes in and out of the classroom, needs to have a special rapport [with the classroom teacher], but the time to build that is, very often, not there.

Clearly, there is the greatest chance of successful collaboration when there is an awareness of the intricate, two-way relationship between cultural outcomes and the larger job design.

Strategies for successful collaboration and inclusion are one of the most critical areas where support and professional development is needed. Locally-developed models of productive practice should provide useful directions for others. However, for these subtle issues, business-as-usual "inservice training" is insufficient.

3. Meaningful shared decision making. There is an old adage: information is power. For many teachers, the two go hand-in-hand. For example, in describing her lack of current knowledge of eligibility criteria in the district, one teacher remarked: "It is like some big secret. [Only the central office] will tell you whether a kid qualifies or not!"

Interviews with teachers who left the field indicated that their perceived lack of involvement in key decisions that directly affected their work was a critical factor in their decisions to leave. The perceptions of a number of these leavers were reflected in the comments of one when she placed teachers squarely at the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy: "This whole district is too big . . . they hand their directives down to people, who hand them down to other people, who hand them down."

Beyond its day-to-day impact on their classroom, such lack of involvement represented for some teachers an implied lack of confidence in, and devaluing of, their professional opinions. In several districts, strategic action planning efforts are rightly beginning to address these issues, looking for more ways to meaningfully involve teachers in decisions that affect their work.

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